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Opposition leader Siddaramaiah during a padayatra against corruption in the State government and demanding the arrest of ex-minister KS Eshwarappa in Chikkamagaluru | EXPRESS

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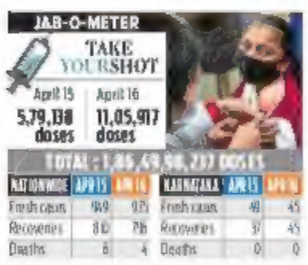

Setback for BJP as rivals sweep by-elections

Saffron party draws blank, while TMC, Cong and RJD together win all 5 seats up for grabs

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE

INDIA has two distinct voting patterns: major and minor. The BJP tends to win the big-ticket elections, but loses many of the small ones that come in between. As the results to a clutch of by-elections filtered in on Saturday, voters across four states reinforced a pattern seen before 2019: the BJP drew a blank in five constituencies in all. In one Lok Sabha and four assembly seats strewn across West Bengal, Maharashtra, Chhattisgarh and Bihar, morale-boosting victories were registered by the Trinamool Congress (TMC), the Congress and the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD).

In the biggest verdict, Mamata Banerjee's TMC wrested the Asansol Lok Sabha seat, with saffron renegade Shatrughan Sinha pulling off a massive upset over his former party. He defeated BJP's Agnimitra Paul by a jaw-dropping 3,03,209 votes.

Asansol was considered a BJP bastion — in 2019, its then star candidate, singer Babul Supriyo, had taken the seat with 1.97 lakh votes. In what would be a source of double delight for Mamata, Supriyo is now on her side, and was the winner in the other Bengal bypoll: to the Ballygunge assembly seat. More than his 20,228-vote margin against his nearest rival, Saira Shah Halim of the CPI-M, what was notable was the modest 13,220 votes polled by the BJP's Keya Ghosh.

The Congress, which has not been receiving a lot of good news from the hustings of late, too turned things around with two victories against the BJP.

In Maharashtra, it retained the Kolhapur North assembly seat. Jayashri Jadhav, contesting under the Congress-Maha Vikas Aghadi umbrella, defeated the BJP's Satyajeet Kadam by over 18,000 votes.

In Chhattisgarh, the Congress's Yashoda Verma took the Khairagarh assembly seat by a margin of 20,176 votes against the BJP's Komal Janghel. Again, a heartening win for the party — the constituency, falling in the Naxal-hit Rajnandgaon district, had registered a high 77.8% turnout.

In Bihar, the ruling NDA suffered an embarrassing defeat as the RJD wrested the Bochahan assembly seat from it, with its candidate Amar Paswan defeating the BJP's Baby Kumari by a massive margin of over 37,000 votes.

P10

> Love you Asansol for serving the BJP a slap in a platter
>
> Babul Supriyo, TMC leader

MISSION 2024

Prashant Kishor likely to join Congress, lead its 2024 poll strategy

RICHA SHARMA @ New Delhi

POLL strategist Prashant Kishor is likely to join the Congress, sources said on Saturday after he made a detailed presentation to the party's top leadership on the 2024 Lok Sabha elections.

During a meeting attended by former party chief Rahul Gandhi, general secretary Priyanka Gandhi Vadra and other senior leaders on Saturday, Kishor chalked out a roadmap to revive the party's electoral fortunes.

Kishor said the Congress should focus on 370-400 Lok Sabha seats. It must forge alliances in 150 more seats in states with stronger regional parties such as West Bengal, Maharashtra, and Tamil Nadu.

Rahul said the proposal needs to be studied in detail and a committee will be constituted to peruse it and submit a report.

Sources said the party's top leadership wants to strike a deal with Kishor at the earliest, preferably before Rahul leaves for his foreign trip at the end of next week. During the meeting, Kishor reportedly said he does not want any position in the party, but a free hand to implement his proposals.

Sources said the leadership wants him to serve as an office-bearer. Discussions will be held on his role in the coming days, keeping in mind the fact that there is a faction within the party opposed to his coming on board.

13 Oppn leaders including Sonia Gandhi, Mamata Banerjee and M K Stalin question PM's silence over communal violence | P9

CONG TAKES GRAFT ISSUE TO DISTRICTS, HOLDS RALLIES

BANSY KALAPPA @Bengaluru

Deciding to take the battle of 40 per cent commission allegations a notch higher, Congress leaders took out rallies and padayatras across the state on Saturday.

Teams of senior Congress leaders, including legislature party leader Siddaramaiah, PCC chief DK Shivakumar, former deputy chief minister Dr G Parameshwara, PCC working president Satish Jarkiholi and Eshwar Khandre, led the protests in different parts of the state, highlighting the issue of corruption in Karnataka.

> You cannot end this battle with Eshwarappa's resignation. Contractors have listed seven to eight other names. Surely they will have to go.
>
> Senior Congress leader

A senior Congressman, requesting anonymity, said, "You cannot end this battle with Eshwarappa's resignation. Contractors have listed seven to eight other names. Surely they will all have to go. Congress will go after the government till all of them are dropped. There have been allegations of corruption against ministers Shashikala Jolle, BC Patil, K Gopalaiah, Dr Sudhkar and others."

Siddaramaiah spoke of alleged corruption in the Rs 20,000 crore Upper Bhadra Irrigation project which had been raised by BJP's own MLC AH Vishwanath.

Congress, seen as the sole opposition in the state, is taking maximum advantage of the corruption case as JDS is seen to be neutral on several issues. Even on Friday, JDS senior leader HD Kumaraswamy slammed Congress and reminded the party of a corruption case against former minister KJ George when the party was in power. But Congress leaders retorted saying Kumaraswamy had no qualms in inducting George as a minister in his own ministry during the previous JDS-Congress coalition government.

CONTINUED ON P4

EXPRESS READ

Tourists shell out ₹ 10K to enter Goa

Bengaluru: Karnataka tourists, who were taking taxis to Goa, were forced to pay Rs 10,262 fine and penalty per vehicle to get a special permit to cross the border. Taxi drivers could not obtain these permits as the State Transport Authority in Bengaluru and RTOs in other districts were closed for four days. More than 40 taxis were held up at the Mollem checkpost in Goa since Thursday. P5

Communal clashes in Northwest Delhi

New Delhi: Communal clashes broke out during a Hanuman Jayanti procession in northwest Delhi's Jahangirpuri area on Saturday, injuring at least five police personnel and two civilians. "When the procession reached Kushal Cinema, a clash broke out between two communities," said Delhi Police PRO Anyesh Roy. P10

Vidyarthi Bhavan in M'swaram in May

Bengaluru: Vidyarthi Bhavan, famous for its masala dosa, is opening a branch in Malleswaram. For the first time in its 79 years history, the restaurant is stepping out of Gandhi Bazaar. There will be a surprise in store when the eatery opens in May first week, said Managing Partner Arun Adiga. P2

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